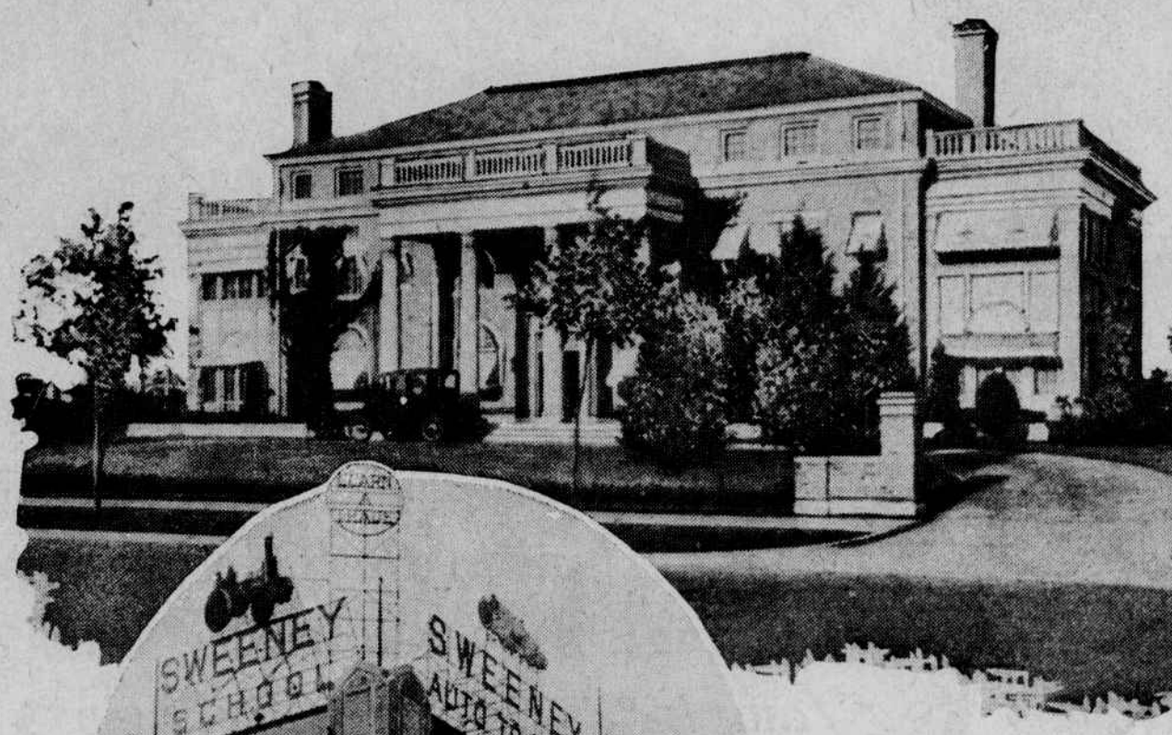
How the Chauffeur Built an Odd Business and Became A Millionaire

Remarkable Success of Young Mechanic Who Organized Class of Students Who Wanted to Learn to Drive---After a Few Years His School Occupies Enormous Building and His Home Is a Magnificent Palace



The magnificent home of the "Sweeney School"—His classes occupy the entire building.

Emory J. Sweeney of Kansas City, Mo., who rode to fortune on an odd idea.

Mr. Sweeney's home was a lodging house when he started his school—On the left is his palatial home to-day.

ONE of the most interesting stories of success in America is that of Emory J. Sweeney of Kansas City, Mo. His story contains all the elements of drama. He began as a poor boy; he worked under a burden for many years; his education was not comprehensive. He did not educate himself first and then set out to make his fortune. He married first and made his fortune next, and then set out to keep ahead of his children in the acquiring of knowledge of things in the world. He is a success because he saw what was needed and tried to fill the want. He epitomizes his career:

"I was sure there was a demand for what I had planned; I was sure it was necessary; and there was never any chance for it not to come out right."

His field of success is odd. It is an automobile school.

Emory J. Sweeney was a chauffeur-mechanic ten years ago. He is worth $5,000,000 to-day, and his home is a mansion. Then he had only a job and a dream. Then he lived in a dilapidated house in a poor part of Kansas City with his parents. Now the building which houses his business is known as one of the finest and most beautiful in the middle West; and his home is the show place of his city. And what is more, the story of his success is a tale which old men tell ambitious sons, and the community in which Emory J. Sweeney was born is as proud of him as it is of his beautiful home and of the handsome office building which bears his name.

He began as a mechanic in a little motor car repair shop. He had left school ten years before that because the need had come for him to aid in the support of his family. Having made some progress, in lifting the burden of poverty, he began to turn some thought to his own future. He had started out as an apprentice mechanic, fortunately in the early days of the automobile industry. He had made progress, for he had a mechanical turn of mind and hand, and an aptitude to learn. And, for himself, he had a dream. Ten years ago he was doing two things. In addition to his repair job he was the owner and chauffeur of a taxicab. That was to add to his income.

In the shop with Sweeney there worked four other men. And to these four typical, grimy mechanics he was a study. They laughed at him and they failed to understand him. He was a mechanic just as they were, with perhaps a little greater inclination to be meticulous in his work. And he talked mechanical talk with them. But he had no time for his associates when he was not in the shop. And the most amazing thing about him was that he wore a white collar and a cravat while he worked, and if his clothes became soiled, he put on clean ones immediately. His overalls were always in clear contrast to the grease spotted, limp garments of the other four mechanics. And he kept his hands and face clean. Naturally the four mechanics accounted Sweeney somewhat queer.

He says now that his success is due to his personal pride. He is the head of the greatest automobile school in the country—an automobile school that occupies the Sweeney Automobile School Building, a multistoried structure that cost more than a million dollars to build. His progress has been phenomenal.

Mr. Sweeney says he learned in the little automobile repair shop where he worked with the four grimy mechanics that owners of cars after a while showed preference for him because he was cleaner, both with their cars and with himself. Finding that he was in demand, he opened a little shop of his own in an obscure street.

The times were propitious for him, for the motor car industry was expanding, and every year was bringing several thousand new cars to Kansas City. The Kansas farmers and the Missouri farmers were coming to realize about that time that the automobile and the truck and the motor tractor were for them. Mr. Sweeney had no difficulty in getting all the repair work he could take care of in the little shop.

In telling his own story, the chauffeur-mechanic millionaire dates his progress toward success from the day he opened the little shop for himself.

His work was good; his patrons were satisfied. Then, one day, a man whose car he had repaired, and who had been impressed by his thoroughness and his neatness, came to him and asked him to take his son in as an apprentice. The patron said his son was mechanically inclined, and that he saw no better way to have him cultivate his tendencies than to place him under Mr. Sweeney. This youth was taken in as an apprentice; and soon afterward there came others who wanted their sons taught the intricacies of the automobile.

But the number he could use in his tiny shop was limited, and he could take only a few apprentices. Then fathers began to come to him, offering to pay him sums ranging from $100 to $500 to take their sons and teach them the trade.

And that was the start of the automobile school. He taught men to drive cars and to repair them, and that is what the great school of which the white collar mechanic is the head teaches to-day.

Soon he found that teaching young mechanics was more profitable than repairing cars. He rented a larger garage. Every year for five years he moved to larger quarters. As he expanded, he advertised. As he advertised he expanded his business. From that little repair shop in an obscure byway there has grown in ten years the magnificent ten-story building that faces the Kansas City Union station. From that first little school with Emory J. Sweeney the teacher and a son of one of his customers the apprentice, there has grown a total annual enrollment of 8,000 students. From a meager living from car repairing there has grown an annual business of $3,000,000. When the Sweeney School building was begun six years ago, its builder put into it all the money he had. Its equipment now is worth almost a half million dollars.

For the first four years after Sweeney left the repair shop where he had made his start, his business grew so rapidly that he had difficulty in keeping track of his finances. Every day he sent a stenographer to the New England National Bank to deposit the day's earnings. He had one and then two and then four stenographers in those days. Now he has 252.

One day J. F. Downing, president of the New England National Bank, telephoned Mr. Sweeney:

"You have close to a million dollars on deposit here," the bank president said. "Don't you think you'd better let me invest some of it for you so that it will be bringing in more interest?"

"I'll attend to that," Mr. Sweeney replied, "Wait until it's an even million."

It grew to an even million within three months. Then Mr. Sweeney drew out the whole amount, and work on the building was started. No bonds were sold; no loans were negotiated. The building is his own. Sweeney wanted a million dollar building. He had the million dollars. So he let the contract, and architects and contractors went immediately to work.

"That's the only system I have," he said in a recent interview. "It's all there and paid for. So is everything in it. So is my home; and so is everything in that. I wait until I have the money. Then I spend it."

That is his system. It is said that he held to it when he bought that taxicab ten years ago. He was offered it on a cash down payment plan, the balance due in monthly installments. He refused to buy it on such an arrangement, waiting until he had the money in his hand. Then he went to the dealer and made the purchase.

Mr. Sweeney's relatives say that he was as cautious in his childhood. It is told that when he was a boy—and that is not very long ago—he bought a bicycle with money he had earned, refusing to take it from the shop until he had every penny with which to pay for it; and after he had taken it home he immediately began to take it apart, bearings, sprocket and bolts. Although he had mechanical inclinations in those days, he was more experimental than adept, and so he found after a while that he could not piece it back together again and have a smooth running, dignified bicycle. So he took it back to the shop from which he had bought it, and left it there to be reassembled. After two or three days he went back to get it, and was told that the price for reassembling it was just twice the amount he had. He told the shopkeeper that he had only half the amount, and he was told in answer that he might take the wheel and pay the rest later. This he refused to do, and his bicycle stayed in the shop more than two weeks while he was doing odd jobs to earn the money to redeem it.

Mr. Sweeney is 38 years old. He is the father of ten children and he is more proud of them than he is of his business. The beautiful home was built for them he says. He has put in elaborate playgrounds and has taken every measure to assure that they will always be satisfied at home.

He is studying all those subjects now that he did not study in his schooldays.

"My school education was limited to six weeks in high school before I became a mechanic," he said. "Now that my older children are in their teens I have to keep busy in all my spare time in the effort to prevent their getting ahead of me. I put aside two hours a day for study. I always liked music, so when I was financially able I began devoting spare hours to it. In my new home I have a pipe organ and I make it a point to be able to play it better than any of the children. I do the same with the piano and the harp.

"My children will never have any excuse for leaving home if I can help it. I have spent $600,000 for that home, and this spring in addition have spent $40,000 equipping a playground for them. They have their own basketball courts, tennis courts, swimming pools and baseball diamond.

"I have always found it a great pleasure to be interested in music and art. In my home I have hung as many paintings as I have been able to obtain. I have found that it broadens me to be active in music circles, to serve actively as a member of the Kansas City Art Institute and to take time from my work and other interests to play golf."

Mr. Sweeney's business was most profitable in the period of the recent financial stringency. It did not touch him. He capitalized it.

"I was in New York when things were booming," he said. "I heard prophecies of hard times and did a little investigating. I believed, too, that hard times were coming. So I hurried home, not to cut down operations but to enlarge them. I increased my office correspondence force five times. I increased my advertising appropriation to a quarter of a million dollars a year. It had been $150,000.

"The motor car industry was in for a slump, and that was bad news for me. The agricultural interests were to suffer, and it is from the wheat and corn belts that my students come. The farmers send their sons to me when times are good to learn to operate and repair all agricultural motor vehicles, from their heavy tractors to the little 'flivver' runabouts and market wagons. But the hard times would make it unlikely for them to send their sons away to school.

"Railroad fares went up, and I immediately began to pay the fares of students from their homes to the school.

"For every blow that hit us I was ready with one in return, and during the depression we had better business than ever before. At the same time many other schools of this kind went broke. They became alarmed when depression hit the country, cut down their advertising and just killed themselves off.

"I don't make conditions, but I study them and try to adjust myself to them. That's what every business man ought to do. If they did there would be fewer failures."

During the war when the army needed motor mechanics Mr. Sweeney undertook to train 6,000 men in his school in a few months. He housed, boarded and taught these 6,000 soldiers at the rate of $1.47 a day and made money. Then the influenza epidemic hit the school and several hundred of the men fell ill. Mr. Sweeney fitted up a hospital out of his own pocket and spent $80,000 caring for the men.

"It was profitable in the end," he said. "Those boys already have sent me enough business to pay back the $80,000 two or three times over."

Jerusalem Artichoke Shows Most Remarkable Diligence

SOME interesting statistics have been gathered as a result of exhaustive studies of plants from a new point of view. Taking those species that are of economic importance—that is, the vegetables, cereals, &c., of value to the human race—the investigator has assembled them in his agricultural laboratory and determined with definite accuracy their efficiency.

He has considered them as if they were so many workers of the farm, ascertaining by experiments just how much each costs and how much it produces. The object has been to ascertain how much in value it takes from the soil to accomplish the result. This learned, it is easy to strike a balance and determine the amount of profit.

These statistics show that the most efficient of all economic plants is the Jerusalem artichoke. This valued vegetable produces on an acre of good land about 7,127 pounds of starch and other digestible substances. It takes from the soil incidentally $26 worth of material. But the difference between consumption and production, in terms of value, is $116.

One might imagine that the potato would be away up but the beet comes next, with an output of 6,384 pounds of digestible substances to the acre, taking $41 worth of material out of the soil, and yielding a balance of $112. Third is corn, which produces 4,652 pounds of digestible substances, consuming $17 worth of material and giving a balance on the credit side of $108 for the acre.

These are the most efficient economic plants, the best workers for man. The potato is fourth, taking $4 worth of material out of the soil for each acre planted, it yields 4,440 pounds of digestible substances (nearly all starch) and shows a balance of $72. Rice gives 2,254 pounds, taking $5 worth from the land, and allows a balance of $45.

Peas produce 1,864 pounds, drawing on the bank to the extent of $2 and give the farmer a clear $40 to the acre. Carrots yield 4,198 pounds and show an expenditure of $17 worth of plant food and a margin of $61 to the good. Rye affords an output of 1,824 pounds of nutriments at a cost of $10 to the soil and furnishes a profit of $26. A crop of crimson clover withdraws from the land hardly more than one-twentieth of the quantity of valuable material consumed by barley.

The greatest of all starch producers is the Jerusalem artichoke, which in this respect is far ahead of the potato. For each acre of land it yields a greater quantity of nutrients than the potato by considerably more than one-third. The beet comes next to the artichoke as a starch producer and next in order Indian corn.